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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: ESTONIA: ETHNIC TENSION OVER TALLINN'S "BRONZE SOLDIER"

REF: TALLINN 439

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Tensions have escalated between ethnic Estonians and Estonia's Russian-speaking community over the fate of a World War II monument in central Tallinn depicting a Red Army soldier. The proximate cause is an event involving the desecration of an Estonian flag carried by two counter-demonstrators during a May 9 Victory Day gathering of Russian-speakers (reftel). Radicals from both sides have since fanned the flames, leading Minister of Interior Kalle Laanet to ban demonstrations at the site. Estonia's governing coalition is split on what to do with the statue: PM Andrus Ansip's Reform Party has said it should be removed from its current location, the Center Party and People's Union advise that it be left alone. Some Russian groups have suggested they will attempt to draw the Embassy into the controversy. If asked, we will say this is a matter for Estonia to resolve. End summary.

¶2. (U) Tallinn's so-called "Bronze Soldier" carries considerable baggage. A wooden memorial erected at the site in the aftermath of World War II was blown up (supposedly by a group of Estonian school girls who then received eight years imprisonment for their deed). The current monument, with the inscription "To those who perished in WWII," has been in place since 1947. In recent years it has come to symbolize the chasm between Estonian and Russian understanding of recent history. Russians consider it "their" monument of victory over fascism in the Great Patriotic War, Estonians as a monument to the Soviet occupation.

¶3. (U) In the aftermath of May 9 Victory Day commemorations scuffles broke out at the site between groups of Estonians and Russian-speakers on several occasions. Following a May 20 incident, Interior Minister Kalle Laanet banned demonstrations at the site. The police have maintained a presence there since.

¶4. (U) Estonia's governing coalition is divided on what to do with the monument. Prime Minister Andrus Ansip has said he favors moving it to a less conspicuous location, though he says the government is not prepared to make a decision on the matter. Ansip's Center Party and People's Union coalition partners both suggest the statue remain where it is.

¶5. (U) With an election cycle approaching, there are plenty of elements on both sides of the debate prepared to exploit the situation for political gain. Russian-speaking politician Dmitri Klenski, unfazed by an electoral pasting during Tallinn municipal elections, has gathered 22,000 signatures on a petition that he plans to present to the Council of Europe. Klenski has been joined by the Russian-speaking Constitutional Party. Party Chairman Andrei Zarenkov proposed to the

Center Party and People's Union a joint antifascist march to the monument on June 22, the anniversary of Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union. (The proposal was ignored.) On the Estonian side, the instigator of the 2004 Lihula monument contretemps Tiit Madisson, and others of his ilk, have talked about the need to form a political party that would "protect Estonian values."

¶6. (U) A recent public opinion survey showed that 53 percent of Estonians support the removal of the monument. Among Russian-speakers, 73 percent opposed the monument's removal.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: We plan to keep our distance from this debate. If asked, we will say this is a matter for Estonia to resolve.

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